Ontario

The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat
CAPACITY BUILDING SERIES

SECRETARIAT
SPECIAL EDITION # 3

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A MODEL FOR ONTARIO SCHOOLS

The ultimate goal of a professional learning community (PLC) can be summed up in three words: improved student achievement. Although the term has grown to encompass a wide variety of concepts and practices, a professional learning community is always a group of people who are motivated by a vision of learning and who support one another toward that end. A PLC:

- represents a collective effort to enhance student learning
- promotes and sustains the learning of all professionals in the school
- builds knowledge through inquiry
- analyses and uses data for reflection and improvement

(Bolam et al., 2005)

Various researchers agree that PLCs are important for improved student achievement.

> "Achieving school improvement involves continual learning groups focused on explicit goals for student learning." (Linda Darling-Hammond)
>
> "In successful schools, teachers form professional learning communities that focus on student work through assessment." (Michael Fullan)
>
> "Improved student learning and teaching result when teachers collaboratively focus on achievement and assessment, questioning practice, and supporting professional growth." (Judith Little)
>
> "Professional learning communities are indeed the best form of staff development." (Dennis Sparks)
>
> (cited in Schmoker, 2006, pp. 109, 177–178)

With such strong research support, Ontario educators are compelled to investigate what makes professional learning communities so effective, and how wider implementation might be achieved in schools and districts across the province.

The graphic on the next page highlights the components of a professional learning community. It is important to stress that if one component is not present in a school's PLC, then this high-yield strategy will not achieve its maximum benefit. For example, schools that have high levels of collaboration or collegiality, yet lack a focus on achievement through assessment, will have little impact on the character and quality of teacher practice (Schmoker, 2006, p. 178).

The Capacity Building Series
is produced by The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to support leadership and instructional effectiveness in Ontario schools. The series is posted at:

www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/

Why PLCs?
"If there is anything that the research community agrees on, it is this: the right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting. Our experience with schools across the nations bears this out unequivocally."
(Schmoker, 2004, p. 48)

New from The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat
The School Effectiveness Framework: A Collegial Process for Continued Growth in the Effectiveness of Ontario Elementary Schools is being released by The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in the fall of 2007.

The framework provides a thorough process for school self-assessment and board review. It is the expectation of The Secretariat that the School Effectiveness Framework will inform the work of PLCs.

For more information call 416-326-8501.

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PLCs at a glance ...

Who is involved?
A PLC begins with a group of teachers and a principal who are committed to building knowledge. Professional learning communities can merge to form learning networks that include several schools, support staff, superintendents, directors, and parents.

What happens in a PLC meeting?
PLCs engage in processes of inquiry and learning focused on improving student achievement. Through classroom, school, and large-scale assessments, members identify the strengths and needs of a group of students and determine the knowledge and skills required to close the achievement gap.

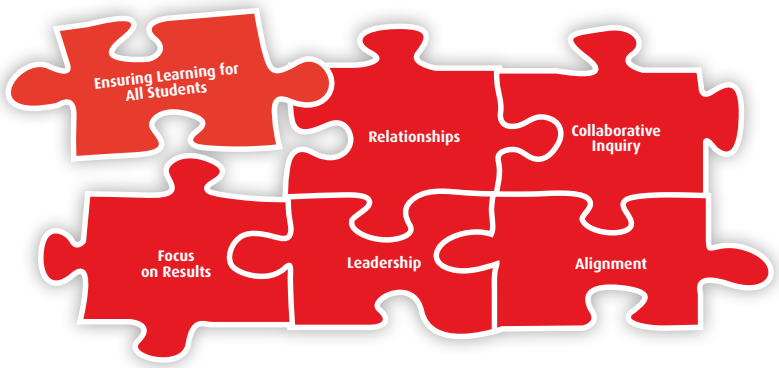
Where do PLCs happen?
PLCs work in many settings. PLCs are particularly effective in schools in supporting job-embedded professional learning that is close to students, resources, and classrooms.

When do PLCs happen?
PLC meetings occur regularly (e.g., weekly, biweekly) and include processes for reviewing current student information and progress, setting goals, determining whether identified actions and interventions are making a difference, studying and discussing new ideas and strategies, and identifying other professional learning needed to support success.

Establishing a clear focus on student learning
- How closely is our focus linked to teaching and learning?
- Does research indicate that our focus enhances student learning?
- How closely is our focus connected to the needs of the students?
- How explicit is our focus? Can participants describe what they intend "to do"?
- Is our focus widely shared as a priority by all?
- How challenging is our focus? Will it foster new thinking and changes in practices?

See Additional Resources on Professional Learning (back page of this monograph) for more specific ideas on getting started.

Components of a Professional Learning Community



1. Ensuring Learning for All Students
A commitment to student learning must be at the centre of professional learning, decision making, and action. When educators take ownership of this commitment, learning (not teaching) becomes the focal point, and a positive outcome results. Schools that demonstrate high levels of student improvement actively support the belief that "all children can succeed in school" (Raptis & Fleming, 2003).

Ensuring all students learn becomes a matter of delivering fair and equitable instruction from classroom to classroom. PLCs must ask themselves, "What happens in our school when, despite our best efforts, a student does not learn?" (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004, p. 7). It becomes the responsibility of PLCs to ensure that students have opportunities for intervention and that systematic and timely supports are in place.

To put this commitment to student learning into practice, the professional learning community participates in a collective sharing of "experiences, information, and capacities to guide their learning" (Mitchell, 2007, p. 13).

2. Focus on Results
Determining whether the efforts of educators are resulting in improvements is an aspect of the professional learning community that cannot be overlooked. In order to focus on learning rather than teaching, student attainment of knowledge and skills must be consistently considered and reviewed. A reflective cycle must be initiated – that is, a cycle in which "every teacher team participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress" (DuFour, 2004, p. 10).

Focusing on results requires careful monitoring of all students. Data are an integral part of how PLCs do business and must become an integral part of the school culture. Without the process of turning data into information – information that is needed to support learning – a foundational component of the PLC is missing. It is only with the inclusion of data that the actions and activities of a professional learning community are focused on learning and improved student achievement.

Highly effective professional learning communities understand the critical importance of different types of assessment data. PLCs monitor student progress through the use of effective common assessments. Decisions are made based on assessment practices that include observation, analysis of student work, and data collected.

3. Relationships

The members of a professional learning community are involved in sharing with others, having their beliefs and practices open to questioning and inquiry, fostering cultures of challenge and focus, and encouraging feedback. These actions can only occur successfully in a community that is based on strong relationships. Coral Mitchell (2007) outlines several principles of engagement that schools need to build sustainable professional learning communities. One of the principles is deep respect. It is based on "the assumption that all people, regardless of who they are or what they do, have feelings, thoughts, beliefs, desires, ideas, and abilities" (Mitchell, 2007, p. 14).

When we share our practices and understandings, we become vulnerable to the judgments of others which can place a strain on relationships. At times, this may involve conflict between differing viewpoints. With deep respect infused in a PLC, conflict can be dealt with through professional, open, and non-judgmental dialogue. This allows staff to view the process of building strong collective knowledge as a positive, necessary, and productive part of the school's culture.

Relationships can be strengthened as trust levels are nurtured in a community. Researchers have identified three types of trust: competence trust, contractual trust, and communication trust (see Fullan, 2003, p. 66 and Katz & Earl, 2007).

4. Collaborative Inquiry

An important component of an effective PLC involves collaborative inquiry. That is why a PLC should set aside time to share practices, examine student work, and plan.

In order to ensure that professional learning is relevant to classroom practice, data from a variety of sources need to be analysed to determine strengths and needs. Teachers are then able to identify areas for further inquiry – in small groups or as an entire staff. Once a focus of inquiry is determined, a professional learning strategy that will best facilitate learning should be considered.

Many strategies for professional learning can promote collaboration such as team teaching, teacher moderation and study groups. Other effective professional learning strategies include action research, case study discussions, classroom walk-throughs, mentoring, and peer coaching (for more detail, see NSDC, 2004). PLCs in turn benefit from these learning strategies as teachers share new skills, experiences, and knowledge gained.

5. Leadership

In any effective school, leaders are required to promote supportive environments, foster reflection, encourage risk taking, and challenge the status quo when it comes to student learning. The principal plays an important role in setting the stage for PLCs that focus on student learning. Principals should spend their energies on supporting environments focused on teaching and learning. They need to build and maintain distributive leadership models to sustain the professional learning. Such models allow teachers to be leaders in the school (e.g., literacy and math coaches). Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour identify teachers as "transformational leaders" as they are "in the best position to transform students' lives, motivate and inspire students, and get students to do things they never thought they could do" (2002, p. 23).

There are many complexities involved in the daily interactions between students and teachers. As PLCs discuss what worked, what did not, and possible next steps, school leaders play a major role in facilitating consistent and effective practices, resulting in higher student achievement. School leaders also support PLCs in cultivating traditions that are de-privatized, making instructional practices transparent.

PLCs focus on results ...

Classroom assessment promotes five key foci of assessment for learning.

- providing specific feedback to students
- involving students actively in their own learning
- adjusting instruction according to assessment results
- recognizing the profound influence assessment has on student motivation and self-esteem (both crucial influences on learning)
- building the capacity of students to assess themselves and understand how to improve

(Assessment Reform Group, 1999)

School-wide assessment promotes consistency and common language across the school.

- sharing student assessments with teams (grade, division, school improvement/ leadership) and professional learning communities for the purpose of identifying patterns and anomalies so that actions are taken to address student needs

Large-scale assessment leads the discussion of questions involving long-term achievement patterns.

- How are the grades or divisions doing this year? Over time?
- How do we know how well they are doing?
- What are we doing to collectively improve learning?
- How do improvement trends of the school and district compare to the province?

In brief ...

PLCs are a catalyst for improving instruction. They involve principals and teachers in the following:

- reflecting and learning together
- reviewing student work and relevant data
- planning for student success
- focusing on students who are not making progress

Some Tips for Promoting Alignment ...

- focus on knowledge building to promote learning of students and educators
- encourage data-driven discussions and engage students in high-yield strategies that make a difference for their learning
- take time to share, evaluate, and celebrate
- ensure school improvement plans consolidate and align the input of all staff and community members (e.g., school council), identify measurable goals, and outline the actions required to achieve them

6. Alignment

As professional learning communities continue to investigate research, delve into data, monitor progress, and make programs transparent, an alignment of beliefs and effective practices evolves. Alignment occurs when teachers from the same grade or division collaborate to promote high levels of learning in each classroom. Networks can then form – based on common needs and focus – to encompass various PLC groups and schools to further build capacity and alignment.

It is important for staff to accept the responsibility of the success of all students, not only the students in their class or grade. With acceptance of this responsibility, PLCs explore how curriculum expectations are achieved at the various grade levels and determine collectively how instruction needs to change to meet the specific needs of students throughout the grades.

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